

Fashioning the African Body in Post-Independence Ghana

Hajar Agrad, April 2023



Felicia Abban, Accra (c. 1960). Wearing kente cloth and lace.

Digitized print by Laurian R. Bowles, with permission from Felicia Abban, 2015

The visual representation of African women in photography in Africa went through an evolution from colonial times to post-independence Africa. The African woman, through the colonial gaze, was the object of fantasy, oversexualization and dehumanisation. Some of the stereotypes born from that portrayal have a lasting impact and still live on, and oppress African women in various ways. Post-independence, African photographers offered a counter-narrative, taking back power and authority over what is seen and conveyed, breaking away from the colonial perception. Fashion was often used as part of the creation of the post-independence visual identity.

Something changed when Africans began to take photographs of one another: you can see it in the way they look at the camera, in the poses, the attitude. The difference between the images taken by colonialists or white adventurers and those made for the sitter's personal use is especially striking in photographs of women. In the former women are being looked at against their will, captive to a controlling gaze. In latter they look at themselves as in a mirror, an activity that always involves seriousness, levity and an element of wonder. (Cole, 2019)

African female image makers participated in the movement, shedding light on the complex female experience. In the case of Felicia Ewurasi Abban, who had access to the political scene at the time, she witnessed the change in her country post-independence and the gender dynamics (Binlot, 2019). She documented in her own way.

Felicia Abban (born Ansah) is a Ghanaian photographer. She is considered to be the first Ghanaian professional female photographer. During her teenage years, she was an apprentice at her father's studio in the harbour city of Takoradi, Ghana, where she was pushed to apply herself and perfect her skills (Tevie). It wasn't until she married the textile designer Robert Abban that she moved to Accra in 1953, where she opened her studio. That is when she started styling herself and taking her photos in her portrait studio before every outing and social event she attended. 'Her outfits ranged from a prim-and-proper shift dress accessorised with a string of pearls, to a traditional Ghanaian headdress worn with hoop earrings' (Binlot, 2019). The photographer gives a glimpse into the female fashion scene of '60s and '70s Ghana. She then showcased the photographs in her studio to promote her business and her husband's services. They were

meant to let potential customers imagine how well they would look if they chose her as their photographer. When talking about post-production, she explains that most of it happens before the pictures are even taken. That means that she took great care in designing the set, choosing the outfits, hairstyles, accessories, lighting, and poses. But she was meticulous about details and was famous for her touch-up post-production services (McTernan, 2019). She worked as a photographer for more than 50 years before she had to stop because of arthritis, although she says even that didn't keep her from photography in other ways. Abban was Kwame Nkrumah's official photographer, Ghana's first president and Africa's first Independence leader. She also worked as a stringer for the publishing house of President Kwame Nkrumah's Conventions People's Party, the Guinea Press Limited (Tawe, 2021). Her husband also went on to design the fabric to commemorate Ghana's independence celebration in 1957 with Nkrumah. Ghana gained independence from British rule in 1957. Considering that Felicia was also part of the political scene, she witnessed the political and social change at the time and was able to document it as the president's photographer, capturing the country at a turning point. She took it upon herself as a mission to empower women around her. Abban kept her studio open, now a museum, and brought in women as apprentices throughout her career and thought she could portray women better than any male photographer, being the only woman in a male-dominated field at the time (Binlot, 2019).

In the photograph on the first page, Felicia is posing, standing with one leg in front, showing the shoe. She is looking to the side, the upper side. This seems to be a popular look as it is present in many of her photographs. She has a slight smile. Her hair is coiffed following the current hairstyle trends. She is wearing dangling earrings that provide a shine to the picture. She is wearing a Kente motif bottom wrap of the Kente cloth dress she wears in another photograph, only this time she is not wearing the three-piece Kaba that formed a fully traditional look. She is pairing it with a traditional waist hold she is holding in her left hand. She is wearing the same item as a shawl in the other photograph, where she is wearing the whole set. She switched the top for a light-coloured blouse with a buttoned collar. It has a sheer lace bodice with ruffled short sleeves over a fitted camisole, conveying femininity and playfulness. She is wearing a woven bracelet on her right wrist, drawing attention to a leather purse with a metallic clasp. The traditional and urban blend, the styling and the pose give insight into the photographer's social status and post-independence Ghana. Beyond that, her chosen profession and her ability to even take on a creative endeavour as a woman at the time in Ghana tell a great deal about not only her life circumstances but also

her application, intellect and dedication. She could have been one of Accra's influential socialites and businesspeople. The vibrant textiles present in many of her photographs, like the one in the picture, are designed and sold by her husband, Robert Ansah. She used her photographs as a way to promote her studio services as well as her husband's designs.

Looking at photographs, one should consider the power dynamics between the photographer and the subject, the intended audience, and the historical and social context. To legitimise colonisation, colonial powers had to dehumanise people in the regions they were targeting and make them look inferior and in need of a helping hand that would lead them into the light of European civilisation. The visual execution of the idea depicted people indigenous to potential colonies as uncivilised savages, inferior in intellect. Fashion was played with to complete that imagery; they were often captured naked in nature, participating in some kind of primitive activities. The photographer had all the power and manipulated the set, styling and subject to create and perpetuate dangerous stereotypes, othering the subject for an audience living across the ocean. Women were looked at against their will through a controlling gaze that stripped them of their humanity and womanhood. A further step to decolonise the practice of visual analysis of historic imagery is to treat photography as a colonial concept more than a mere tool and not look at the resulting image as an instance of the past (Azoulay, 2019). That means that photography, within the colonial context, was the process of capturing the subject in the past and creating a false image that lives in the colonial mind, a 'visual proof of white superiority' (Choudhary, 2022).

In a way, Felicia Abban defined the postcolonial female gaze and visual identity in Ghana and West Africa. The African woman post-independence is sophisticated, beautiful, proud of her heritage, but not afraid to incorporate contemporary pieces that marry and complement her traditional dresses. "Abban's vision of respectable femininity that is professional, photogenic, and stylised through affirmations that are urban, middle-class, and cool" (Bowles, 2016). She contributed to dismantling the colonial imagery of the African black woman as primitive, monstrous, savage, and uncivilised. Much of that imagery showed a naked, oversexualized black body, sometimes adorned with many beads. The contrast to the photographer using a few accessories conveys the tastefulness and style of the Ghanaian women. From underdressing and over accessorising to multiple-piece outfits and fewer, strategically styled accessories, Felicia presents a counternarrative to the dehumanising colonial gaze. She challenges the colonial stereotypes and provides a visual commentary of the nuanced and complex experience of the African woman. Staring into the eyes

is often considered to be an intimate act, which was violated by the colonial photographer in most photographs of African people. Looking away, smiling as opposed to staring right into the colonial lens, may be interpreted as maintaining privacy to what is perceived and claiming a position of power. The African woman took the tool of the coloniser and used it to her advantage. She challenged the colonial perceptions of her as either an exotic object of desire or a nurturing mother.

She used her own voice and artistic expression to challenge the colonial gaze and reshape the narrative.

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